

AUTHORITY IN AND OF THE CHURCH IN THE LIGHT OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

C. Salvation: Grace, Justification and Synergy

The general theme of the Lutheran - Orthodox Joint Commission proposed already in 1989 in Bad Segeberg, Germany, and in 1991 in Moscow, Russia, was finally adopted in Sandbjerg, Denmark, in 1993: "Authority in and of the Church in the Light of the Ecumenical Councils." The 8th meeting of the Lutheran - Orthodox Joint Commission in Limassol, Cyprus, 1995 agreed at the end of their statement on the "Understanding of Salvation in the Light of the Ecumenical Councils," that Lutherans and Orthodox still needed to explore further their different concepts of 'synergeia' in the Orthodox teaching and tradition, and 'sola fide' in the Lutheran teaching and tradition. In response to this request the 9th plenary of the Joint Commission in Sigtuna, agreed on the following statement.

- 1) "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Logos, the Son of God, in whom everything was created, is the light which enlightens everyone. The Logos revealed himself to Abraham, to the prophets of the Old Testament, and in the Law given to Moses. In the last days "He became man for us and for our salvation," (Nicean-Constantinopolitan Creed 381) which He fulfilled through His life, death and resurrection, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church at Pentecost. Salvation depends entirely upon the grace of the Holy Trinity, given to us and experienced through Word and sacraments in the life of the Church. The grace of God comes to humanity from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. The Father creates, redeems and glorifies us through the Son, in the Spirit.
- 2) Lutherans and Orthodox teach that divine grace eternally flows out of God's love for His creation. It overcomes the sin of humanity to achieve God's plan for the fullness of time, which is "to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth (Eph. 1:10). Grace is not simply a reaction to human sin. Lutherans and Orthodox both teach that God invites humanity to full communion in Him, still remaining true God beyond all human comprehension. Orthodox express this reality by the distinction between the divine essence, which is unapproachable (cf. Exodus 33:18-23, I Tim 6:16) and the divine, uncreated energies, the multitude of divine grace in which God comes down to us and in which we are called to participate. As St. Basil the Great says, "We know our God from his energies, but we do not claim that we can draw near to his essence; for his energies come down to us, but his essence remains unapproachable." (Epist. 234, 1). Lutherans in their terminology do not make use of the distinction between essence and energies, but they fully accept the belief that God's grace eternally flows to us from his very being because "God is love and who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." (I John 4:16).
- 3) As St. Paul teaches, the grace which saves us is centered in Christ (cf. Rom 5). Grace presupposes the work of Christ both in the Old Testament (cf. I Cor. 10:2-4) and in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 3:24), and is given as the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ himself (cf. II Cor. 13:13). We receive the grace of Christ in the Holy Spirit, and without the Holy Spirit no one can believe in Christ (cf. I Cor. 12:3). The Holy Spirit, whom Christ sends from the Father, forms us in the divine likeness. The Holy Spirit calls human beings to faith in Christ through the Gospel in the Church, frees them from sin and death in Holy Baptism, enlightens

them and bestows His gifts upon them. He sanctifies and sustains the baptized in true faith; He nourishes them by the flesh and blood of the Lord (cf. John 6:56) in the communion (*koinonia*) of Christ's Body (cf. I Cor. 10:16-17). He thus leads them through many depths "from glory to glory." (II Cor 3:18).

- 4) Though human beings may feel dependence on God (cf. Acts 17:23,27), because of sin they can neither ask for, nor obtain divine grace through their own powers. Grace is entirely God's gift, which God gives because God wants all human beings to be saved (cf. I Tim. 2:4). Faith is God's gift from its inception, since it is the Holy Spirit who, by divine grace, enlightens the human mind and strengthens the human will to turn to God. As stated by Cyril of Alexandria: "For it is unworkable for the soul of man to achieve any of the goods, namely, to control its own passions and to escape the mightiness of the sharp trap of the devil, unless he is fortified by the grace of the Holy Spirit and on this count he has Christ himself in his soul." (Against Julian, 3)
- 5) Both Lutherans and Orthodox teach that divine grace operates universally and that God freely grants grace to all human beings. God's saving grace does not operate by necessity or in an irresistible manner, since human beings can reject it. Regarding the way in which salvation is appropriated by the believers, Lutherans, by teaching that justification and salvation are by grace alone through faith (*sola gratia, sola fide*), stress the absolute priority of divine grace in salvation. When they speak about saving faith they do not think of the dead faith which even the demons have (cf. James 2:19), but the faith which Abraham showed and which was reckoned to him as righteousness (cf. Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3,9). The Orthodox also affirm the absolute priority of divine grace. They underline that it is God's grace which enables our human will to conform to the divine will (cf. Phil 2:13) in the steps of Jesus praying, "not as I will but as You will" (Matt. 26:39), so that we may work out our salvation in fear and trembling (cf. Phil. 2:12). This is what the Orthodox mean by "synergy" (working together) of divine grace and the human will of the believer in the appropriation of the divine life in Christ. The understanding of synergy in salvation is helped by the fact that the human will in the one person of Christ was not abolished when the human nature was united in Him with the divine nature, according to the Christological decisions of the Ecumenical Councils. While Lutherans do not use the concept of synergy, they recognize the personal responsibility of the human being in the acceptance or refusal of divine grace through faith, and in the growth of faith and obedience to God. Lutherans and Orthodox both understand good works as the fruits and manifestations of the believer's faith and not as a means of salvation.
- 6) Lutherans, together with the Orthodox, affirm that salvation is real participation by grace in the nature of God as St. Peter writes: "that we may be partakers of the divine nature." (II Pet. 1:4) That happens through our participation in the death and resurrection of the Lord in His body, in Whom all the fullness of God dwells (cf. Col. 2:9). This is the way in which salvation is realized as purification, illumination and glorification, also referred to as deification (*theosis*). This terminology has not been central in Lutheran tradition. Lutherans prefer to speak of the sanctification in the body of Christ who is Himself present in the faith of the believers. Lutherans, together with the Orthodox, affirm the reality of the believers' participation in the divine life, in which they grow by the grace of God.
- 7) Lutherans and Orthodox affirm that on the cross Christ the incarnate Word, through whom God reconciled us to Himself (cf. II Cor. 5:18-19), died for our sins (cf. I Cor. 15,3) and freed us for a new life by His resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:5) so that having crucified the passions of the flesh we may live in the freedom of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:24-25).

Lutherans seeing that Christian life is a continuous struggle against sin and “flesh” (cf. Gal 5:16-18), and being afflicted by this experience do not look to their own good works, or their own failures, but look to Christ on the cross and his resurrection and trust in God’s promise, the word of forgiveness in the Church. Therefore Lutherans place specific emphasis on the forensic dimension of salvation. They stress that God forgives sin and imputes the righteousness of Christ to sinners through faith, and that we may therefore for salvation rely entirely upon the Father’s mercy in Christ through the communion of the Holy Spirit (cf. II Cor 13:13).

For the Orthodox, the redemptive work of Christ is received by the believer in the Church, His Body, to whom the promise of forgiveness of sins has been given by the Lord (cf. Mat. 18:18). In faith and humility, the believer puts his trust in the truth and power of the said promise, in the unsearchable riches of Christ’s mercies (cf. Eph. 2:4, 3:8) and His boundless love for humankind (*philanthropia*) and in the prayers of the communion of saints (cf. Heb. 12:1, 22-23) and the intercession of the Most Holy Theotokos (cf. John 2:3; 19:26-27). The struggle against passions (cf. I Cor 9:24-27, Eph. 6:10-17) in the power of the Holy Spirit is a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. It aims at the purification of the heart (cf. Mat. 5:8) and the illumination (cf. Mat. 5:14, II Cor 4:6) leading to glorification (cf. John 17:22; II Cor 3:18, II Peter 1:4).

- 8) Lutherans and Orthodox believe that “the sufferings of the present time are not worthy of comparing with the glory about to be revealed in us.” (Rom. 8:18). In salvation we become children of God by grace and “it has not yet been revealed what we shall be. But we know that when it is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” (1 John 3:2). And we also know that “the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom 8:19) and his daughters, and we know that “creation shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21, cf. I Cor 15:52-54).

Having thoroughly explored and discussed our respective understandings of salvation in relation to grace, justification and synergy, according to the mandate given to us in Limassol, we have noted during this 9th session of our dialogue the central points of agreement between Lutherans and Orthodox with differences in emphasis and terminology.

The Joint Commission expresses its strong affirmation of the continuation of the dialogue between the two traditions, and proposes a new general theme for the next period: “The Mystery of the Church,” and as its first subtheme: “Word and Sacraments (Mysteries) in the life of the Church.”

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